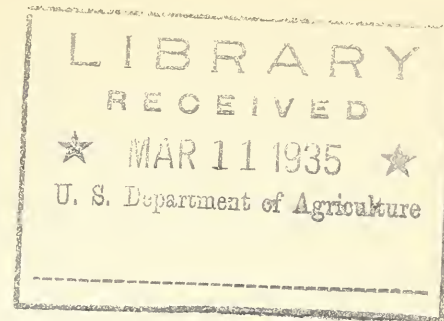


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Discussion Group Topic No. 8.

IS THE FARM LABORER GETTING A SQUARE DEAL?

This material has been prepared to supply assistance for discussion groups. It is not intended to direct attention to any particular point of view. Neither is it presumed to be a complete or even an orderly presentation of the discussion possibilities of the topic. Its purpose is to stimulate discussion. It is intended to assist in creating opportunities for discussion in the belief that through intense discussion people may find ways of thinking through for themselves vital questions which require democratic decision.

The attention of discussion leaders and others is called particularly to the availability of "Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods." This contains practical suggestions and information.

Copies of "Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods" and copies of this and other group discussion topics can be obtained from the Department of Agriculture, Room 202, Washington, D. C., or by writing to the agriculture college of your state.

February, 1935.

Miss Bechard

Topic: IS THE FARM LABORER GETTING A SQUARE DEAL?

There were approximately 2,730,000 laborers working for wages on farms in the United States April 1, 1930. In summer and especially harvest time the number is larger. The labor is of greatly varied character. There are, for instance, the hired man with a family, the transient fruit pickers and harvest hands, usually unmarried, the sugar beet contract workers consisting commonly of parents and children. The wages paid vary, as do other arrangements with employers covering shelter, food, hours of daily and weekly labor, whether employed by hour, day, week, month, etc. Form of payment also is varied. Sometimes it is wholly cash, as in other occupations, but more commonly board and lodging are furnished to unmarried men, and various perquisites to married men.

1. WHAT IS A FAIR BASIS FOR DETERMINING FARM WAGE RATES?
2. SHOULD THERE BE LAWS PROTECTING FARM WORKERS --- MINIMUM WAGE LAWS, WORKMEN'S ACCIDENT AND INJURY COMPENSATION ACTS, ETC.?
3. SHOULD FARM WORKERS BE ENCOURAGED TO ORGANIZE UNIONS?
4. SHOULD IMMIGRATION LAWS BE CHANGED TO MAKE AVAILABLE MORE YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN AS FARM WORKERS?
5. ARE THERE OPPORTUNITIES IN THIS NEIGHBORHOOD FOR IMPROVING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FARMERS AND THEIR LABORERS?
6. WHAT CHANCE HAS THE FARM LABORER OF TODAY TO BECOME A FARM OPERATOR AND LAND OWNER?

SOME PROS AND CONS

I.

"Farm laborers' wages should be determined by the requirements of a decent standard of living. Farmers should not, any more than manufacturers, 'grind down the faces of the poor.' They should not take advantage of the laborers' necessity, but pay a wage equivalent in purchasing power or standard of living with that paid similar labor in the cities. Wages might be set on a sliding scale - lower in winter when work is slack and employment difficult to obtain, higher in summer and still higher in harvest time, but totaling for the year such an amount as will permit a decent standard of living."

II.

"Farm laborers' wages are low because farmers cannot fix prices, raise wages, and pass along to the consumer the added costs, as can many manufacturing concerns. In determining wage rates the farmers' ability to pay, as well as the laborers' needs, must be considered. If prices of farm products are raised, farmers will gladly pay better wages and provide better housing for laborers."

"Farm laborers' real wages are much higher than the cash wages paid. Commonly board is furnished unmarried farm labor and nearly always lodging. Married farm laborers generally are provided with a house and frequently with land for a garden, pasture for a cow and sometimes other feed, etc. Farm laborers usually live almost as well as the farmers themselves, and this cannot be said of factory laborers and their employers. Indeed, in recent years some farm laborers have saved a little money, while most farmers have been getting deeper and deeper into debt. If farm wages are to rise it must be through an increase in farmers' income. The income of farmers and the wages of labor rise and fall together."

III.

"Farm workers deserve protection from occupational hazards like other workers. Every year about 5,000 persons engaged in agriculture are fatally injured and 85,000 receive injuries compelling them to give up work temporarily. Increasing use of farm machinery, especially power machinery, has made farm work as hazardous as factory employment. Lack of proper safeguards on machinery and in farm buildings increases the occupational hazards. Though it is commonly considered that there are no occupational diseases in agriculture, there are many dangers due to weather changes and to infectious diseases that may be contracted in handling livestock.

"Farm laborers, unlike industrial workers, have few laws protecting them against exploitation. Many states, in enacting labor legislation, exempt agricultural labor. If a farm hand is injured, he has to depend upon public aid or charity. Minimum farm wages should be fixed and maximum working hours set by law, with extra pay for overtime."

IV.

"Farmers do not make the profit that manufacturers make in normal times, in fact all that most farmers receive in return for their labor and capital is a meager living. They cannot pay even a part of the cost of insurance for farm laborers without further reducing their standard of living. If the government is willing to bear the cost of occupational insurance for farm laborers, farmers would be glad to see such protection given. Farm laborers do not need protective laws because their relationship with employers is more personal than in manufacturing. Farm hands in many areas live in the farm home and are treated as a member of the family."

V.

"Farm laborers, like those in some other countries, notably England, should organize and employ the principle of collective bargaining as trade unions. In so doing they can do considerable to bring about improved working and living conditions and higher wage rates, and agitate to better advantage for other matters of common interest.

"If proper means are used by farm labor leaders to agitate for and secure due improvement in farm working conditions and wages the influence of their efforts may be far reaching. It will probably be desirable that some degree of organization be maintained, particularly in regions of specialized production in agriculture to properly represent hired agricultural workers when the occasion demands it."

VI.

"Farm laborers need not organize unions because their relations with their employers are close and personal. Difficulties can be adjusted by mutual action. Working and living conditions vary widely from farm to farm. They do not permit uniform action and treatment which unionism would require.

"Imposition of union hours, wages and working conditions would increase food costs in opposition to public demand. Most farm laborers are hired singly on scattered farms. It would be very difficult to organize and maintain farm laborers unions. The high percentage of farm laborers who are transient would prevent farm laborers unions holding membership. Farm laborers working and saving to rent or buy farms will not submit to union regulations."

VII.

"Immigrants supply the low-priced labor which is all that farmers can afford to employ at present. These laborers generally become good citizens, and their children good Americans. American labor does largely skilled work. Immigrants sometimes provide the only labor which will do certain necessary tasks - as thinning beets and similar work. Immigrants are needed to supply the labor necessary to insure the continued prosperity of the country. The nation can properly meet the social problems resulting from the inflow of foreign labor."

VIII.

"We have enough workers already in the country. Many American laborers are unemployed and looking for work. They deserve first consideration. Immigrants hold back national advance in standards of living by working for lower wages and submitting to poorer working and living conditions than will native-born Americans. Immigrants create social problems of assimilation, illiteracy, delinquency, disease and demands for public relief out of proportion to their numbers."

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